Ill-Chosen Guides to a Mistaken Goal

A Sermon on the Commission on Faith and Order

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Now therefore why tempt ye God to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear.—Acts 15: 10.

THE Jewish rites and ceremonies served a useful purpose in their day, but St. Peter realized that they could not be made of universal obligation. Mighty to impress and subdue people of a certain temperament, they lacked world-wide appeal. Strong to preserve the racial type, they were powerless to reconstruct and expand. The Gospel of Jesus Christ with its emphasis upon faith and love, and loyalty to a person had come to the son of Jonas as a great deliverance, and he was unwilling to allow that liberty to be lessened. So although the circumcision of the Gentiles would have secured uniformity in the Church, and would have been a concession to Jewish prejudices that would have been greatly appreciated, the great Apostle steadfastly refused to make the exaction.

A similar devotion to the liberty which is in Christ Jesus makes many men distrustful to-day of movements in behalf of Church Union, in the hands of people who believe that there is some mysterious sacramental value in unity of organization. There was a day when men believed that membership in a particular Church, organized in a certain way, possessing certain ear-marks and notes, was essential to salvation. That belief, like the crude beliefs of Israel's opening day, had a certain educative and civilizing value; but in the long run, it proved a yoke of bondage, that our fathers were not able to bear. We now know that as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God. As at one time certain people were attached by law to the soil, so in former years people used to feel bound in conscience to believe whatever was held by the Church in which they were baptized. That day has passed. Men now realize that the glorious mes-

sage authenticates itself, and that it is infinitely simpler than our elaborate formularies. They have accordingly set to work to reshape their church organizations and to see whether some larger and more effective organizations cannot be formed. Some people are joining in the movement because they fear the dissolving force of the human intellect will overthrow all our beliefs unless we can erect against it the breakwater of a vast organization. You will not find the liberal-minded men in any of the churches taking much interest in these efforts to preserve truth by ecclesiastical readjustments. They know that the proper power for the maintenance of Christian truth is the beauty of Christian lives, and the appeal to the heart of the truth as it is in Jesus. The bulwarks of truth, they believe, are in the soul of man, naturally Christian. They hold that Unity of Spirit is often more clearly manifest when it enables men to overlook existing differences.

Not for mystical reasons, but for plain, practical purposes the abolition of many denominational barriers is to be desired. Waste of men, money and effort can be avoided if distinctions that have lost their meaning can be done away. Towards the achievement of this great end, little, however, can, in my judgment, be expected to be contributed by this Commission on Faith and Order. I think that it may be helpful, if I should give my reasons at some length for this conviction.

In the first place, the whole movement for Church Unity has been placed in the wrong hands so far as our Church is concerned.

If we were seeking to bring about a union of any kind with the Greek Church, the proper persons to begin the negotiations would clearly be some members of our Church who were imbued with an admiration for that Church's services to Christendom, and were reverent students of its history, doctrines, worship and life. Such negotiators would understand our life, and at the same time as admirers of the Holy Orthodox Church would

appreciate the concessions which that Church might be willing to consider in the interest of a closer intimacy. No one would think of placing a person like myself on any committee whose duty was the formation of some kind of alliance with the Russian Church. I would not even go on a commission to aid the Churches of this worship in Philadelphia. No form of Christianity, in my judgment, has more disastrously separated religion and morals than the Eastern Church. The best course, in my opinion, is to allow these racial groups in our midst to be broken up and absorbed into our mass. As an American and a Protestant I am glad when these people join the Churches of the Reformation faith and of the English speech. With these convictions it is clear that I am not the sort of an emissary to send to the Greek or Russian Church. The proper person should clearly belong to another school of thought.

In the same way, if negotiations are to be opened with Rome for some recognition of our orders, and some concession in the interest of a closer *approchement,* the embassador should properly be taken from the party in our Church that loves to think of our communion office as differing in no important respect from the Roman Mass. No one would advocate sending one of our Hebrew fellow-citizens as an embassador to the Jew-baiting nation of Russia, or the Jew-hating court of Vienna. Successful negotiations can only be conducted by sending as representatives, people who are *personae gratae* to those who receive them. The emissary to Rome should be a Ritualist.

But the Church of Rome is really outside of practical consideration. The Pope, with a correct understanding of our formularies, has declared that we have not priests ministering at our altars in the Roman meaning of the term priest, and that our ministry cannot, therefore, be accepted. The only terms that Rome will consider are terms that it would be disloyalty to our past, and to the

freedom which we enjoy in Christ Jesus, for us to grant. The only people who are really in a position to join in any practical arrangements in the interests of Church Unity, are the Protestant Churches of our own land. They are willing to consider such questions as delimitation and apportionment of missionary territory, and unnecessary overlapping of Churches. They are quite willing to meet together, pray together, and work together with us and with one another. While they do not attach any Sacramental value to Ecclesiastical Unity, holding that the unity of the spirit alone has any great moral significance, still they are anxious to organize their forces in such a way that the maximum of efficiency may be attained with the minimum of friction.

Now, what kind of a Commission have we sent to confer with them? Men who belong to the Protestant wing of our Church, and are in close touch with the Protestant world? Men who are students of Protestant theology, and sympathize with the spirit of freedom, independence, and personal initiative that has been nurtured and developed in the Protestant Churches? Not at all. The leading spirits of the Commission on Faith and Order belong to the Sacramentarian or Catholic party, the party of feudal loyalty, and of aesthetic longings for the graces and forms of an extinct civilization.

I mention this complexion of the committee with great frankness, in spite of the talk that circulates among certain rather confused people, that we ought not to recognize any parties in our Church. In every living Church there are parties; those in favor of change and modification making one party, and those resisting innovations constituting the other. One might as well seek to give an account of the life of man on this planet and ignore the alternations of day and night, or endeavor to narrate the history of the United States without any reference to political parties, as try to discuss the problems of the Protestant Episcopal Church without any recognition of its va-

rious doctrinal schools. In the main they fall into two great divisions, the Protestant School, that emphasizes the freedom of the individual as the child of God, and the Catholic party, that emphasizes the authority of the Church as the body of Christ. This latter school is closer to the Church of Rome and the Greek Church, but it is the former school that supplies our point of contact with Protestantism.

If these Catholic Churchmen really wished to draw close to the Protestant world, they ought to have seen to it that instead of Dr. Manning, such men as Dr. McKim, or Dr. Mann were put at the head of this Commission. Constituted as it is nothing is really to be expected of the Commission in its dealing with the Protestant world.

The truth of the matter is, the Catholic party really does not want to make any concession to Protestantism. Their real hope is that they may through diplomacy, and various arts of persuasion get the Protestant world to make some concession to the so-called "Catholics," just as the Judaizers in St. Peter's day wanted the Gentile Christians to make some concession to Jewish prejudice and usage in the interest of uniformity. The tepidity of their desire for any close accord with the Protestant world as it is now organized is shown in the opposition of Dr. Manning and other Catholics on the Board of Missions to this Panama Conference—where delegates from our Church are to confer with delegates of other Churches about the religious needs of South America. A little history will here be illuminating.

About twenty-five years ago the students of the Virginia Seminary for some reason or other found it very difficult to secure missionary appointments in the Foreign field. The present Missionary Bishop of North Dakota, one of our bleakest fields, was refused on his graduation from the Seminary an appointment to the Foreign fields on account of his weak lungs. The students, therefore, resolved to open up new fields and turned to South Amer-

ica. There they discovered the greatest religious ignorance, and an exceedingly low state of morals. The Confucianists have *"The Four Books,"* Brahminical India has the Vedas, the Buddhists the Story of the Buddha, the Mohammedans the Koran, but the Christians of South America are without the Bible. Religion without its sacred books there degenerates, and a priesthood pledged to celibacy lives in open immorality. As a member of the Faculty of the Seminary I was requested by the students to ask the American Church Missionary Society to undertake the charge of a mission to that land. The Society consented and the Rev. Jas. W. Morris, and the Rev. L. L. Kinsolving were sent out to Brazil, where they found the conditions had been correctly reported to us, and established a mission that soon gave promise of the prosperity that has crowned the labors of those pioneers. Shortly after their departure the General Convention met in Baltimore, and there was the greatest concern expressed by the Catholic school over this intrusion into the field of a sister Church. Great exception was taken against the voluntary nature of the mission. It was explained that the expedition was in the nature of an exploration and experiment; that if it failed, the Church was in no wise committed; and that if it succeeded the Church could then take it up. The explanation was, however, waived aside by this school. "In these matters," they said, "nothing should be done without due authority." Years have passed. We have missions in South America, Mexico, Cuba, Porto Rico, the Philippines. The principle is established that we will not stay out of needy regions, even if the Roman Catholic Church is already there. A conference is called that Christian Churches may confer upon the situation in South America, and the representatives of the Catholic party are scandalized once more. The trouble now is that our Board has authorized conferees to attend. Volunteers, it now seems, would be well enough, but official representatives are unbearable.

Such inconsistency shows the real state of their minds. They do not want to confer with Protestants about the religious and ethical needs of a Roman Catholic civilization. Their real inclination would be to confer with Roman Catholics over the essential oneness of our views of the Sacraments. The only negotiations that they wish to conduct with Protestants are with a view to getting the Protestants to accept religious rites at the hands of our bishops. They dread working together and praying together, and planning together with Protestants. Negotiations with Protestants in the hands of such conferees are not the negotiations in which friends of religious liberty can take much interest.

One of our bishops of the sacramentarian school* quotes with approval the statement that "the goal of Protestantism is Atheism." Think of it! Apostolical succession protects the doctrine of God that would be lost, if not enfolded by the lawn-sleeved arms of Bishops! Then consider the unwisdom of deputing men of this way of thinking to confer with the Protestant Churches.

Even more fatal than the constitution of the commission is the mistaken nature of the goal. We cannot all be brought to one definition of the essentials of Christianity. The faith by which men are saved varies in its content with their enlightenment. Indeed in the New Testament "faith" does not denote a creed, but a spiritual attitude.† Abraham believed God and it was counted unto him for righteousness and he was justified by faith; but in his case it was faith in the future of his race. The paralyzed man at Solomon's gate had faith that Peter and John could heal him and so received the blessing. Paul had faith in the heavenly vision and in the summoning voice. The eunuch of Queen Candace believed Philip and the prophet Isaiah, that Jesus was the Messiah. The

*See Bishop Kinsman's "The Issues before the Church."

†The single exception is Jude 4, where "the faith" denotes some simple objective belief like salvation through Christ. The epistle is one of the latest and least accredited books in the New Testament.

creed may be elaborate and definite, but the man who professes it may lack a saving faith; and on the other hand the spiritual attitude may be like a hand grasping in the dark a rope that pulls it upward, little being known of the source from which deliverance comes, and yet blind, dumb, confused though it is, such a faith may save. The disciples followed Jesus first and defined him afterwards. The condition of discipleship was not the definition, but loyalty and love. Near the Cross the creed was short. It was composed of love and admiration, rather than of definite propositions. Surely in this age, when philosophy is teaching us so eloquently that much of our deepest knowledge can never be expressed in propositions, it is a mistake to establish a commission to reduce Christianity to its essential propositional forms. A commission that has taken as its irreducible minimum of Christianity the Nicene and the Apostles' Creed needs to learn the meaning of the great words with which Lightfoot closes his classic Commentary on the Epistle to the Philippians:

"If we would learn what St. Paul held to be the Gospel's essence, we must ask ourselves what is the significance of such phrases as 'I desire you in the heart of Jesus Christ,' 'To me to live is Christ,' 'That I may know the power of Christ's resurrection,' 'I have all strength in Christ that giveth me power.' Though the gospel is capable of doctrinal exposition, though it is eminently fertile in moral results, yet its substance is neither a dogmatic system, nor an ethical code, but a Person and a Life."

Even worse, however, is the error in setting up for examination as a basis of union this idea of Order. The idea, which it is intended to imply by this word "Order" is that there is some one guild or caste that can alone efficaciously administer the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper and alone authoritatively proclaim the gospel of the grace of God. Now, this idea is imported into our religion from the monarchical government and the pagan priesthoods

of Imperial Rome, and has no place in our earliest and most authoritative documents. On this subject, let me quote the learned Dr. Hort, Bishop Westcott's fellow laborer on the splendid edition of the Greek Testament that guided so greatly the revisers of 1880, a scholar whom Dr. Sanday has not hesitated to call the greatest theologian of his day in the English Church. In his golden little book, called ECCLESIA, Dr. Hort sums up his discussion of the offices in the Church in these luminous and profound words:

"In the Apostolic Age the offices instituted in the Ecclesia were the creation of successive experiences and changes of circumstances, involving at the same time a partial adoption first of Jewish precedents by the Ecclesia of Jerusalem, and then apparently of Judean Christian precedents by the Ecclesiae of the Dispersion, and the Gentiles. There is no trace in the New Testament that any ordinances on this subject were prescribed by the Lord, or that any such ordinances were set up as permanently binding by the Twelve, or by St. Paul, or by the Ecclesia at large. Their faith in the Holy Spirit, and his perpetual guidance was too much of a reality to make that possible."

Nothing but discord or dissimulation can be produced by efforts to get together on the basis of Order. If there is frankness and courage, there will be discord, and if there is an acceptance of sacerdotal claims for the cause of peace, there will be dissimulation. This medieval idea of Order is one of the great corrupters of the simplicity of the gospel. It is not taught in the Prayer Books, but it is rife in our pulpits and Church papers. We ought to get rid of it. Those who hold it are obliged to turn away from our primitive records to what the Homilies call with Elizabethan plainness of speech "the filthy puddles of human traditions"—that is the traditions of despotic Rome of the Cæsars. The true test of a Church is not its historic origin, but its life, and

influence. Jesus did not say that the tree was to be known by its roots, but by its fruits. To raise any question at this day as to the validity of Presbyterian, or Baptist, or Methodist orders seems to me a strange blindness to the testimony of the Spirit. I should as soon look into marriage records to determine whether a man were a member of the human race. Cautious statements that *our* ministry at any rate is valid and regular, were absolutely necessary at the time when our articles and formularies took shape. In that day all Protestant Europe lived in dread of the puissant warriors of Spain, who after their long warfare with the Moors, were showing their hardihood and matchless discipline all over the world. Conservative Englishmen were anxious so to frame the standards and mould the practice of the National Church, that it might, if possible, contain within its communion the whole nation.

But the time has passed for such cautious reverence for historic orders. Three hundred and odd years during which the Protestant world has steadily forged ahead have surely taught us something. The superiority of the United States, whose people are in the main ministered to by ministers of non-Episcopal Churches, to the natives of the Iberian peninsula, where everyone receives sacraments from regularly ordained ministers, ought to teach us something and enable us to draw some conclusions. "Nature tendeth to validities," says the judicious Hooker. How true this is! The child of illegitimate parents does not inherit their illegitimacy; society cures the taint. The possession of property in time confers title. Age, custom, usage, all have validating force in law and in the natural run of things. And can it be that the gospel of mercy is less merciful than human law; that the dispensation of grace has less kindness than the course of civilization, and that the Church, the great society for saving men, has less inherent curative power in her corporate life than the State? The whole conception that Jesus

Christ placed a patent upon his gospel or his sacraments, is opposed to the largeness of his mercy, and the universality of his care for men. I find such teaching neither in the letter of the New Testament nor in the spirit of the Gospel.

Few things are more shocking to Christian sensibility than to hear a Christian minister announce that he would not be willing to exercise his ministry unless he felt that he had a higher commission than was contained in the duty of a regenerated man to bring other men into the new life in Christ Jesus. What motive could be properly more powerful than this that having heard yourself, you therefore spoke; that having been helped yourself, you desired to help others; that having found God, through Jesus Christ, you longed to bring other prodigals back to the Father's house and the Father's blessing? It is a good thing to have an organization backing one and aiding one, but no organization is equal in power to the Spirit of God acting directly in the human heart. We shall leave these organizations and rites and ceremonies, but that Eternal Spirit will go with us, uphold us, and bless us through eternity. In moments of bitter trial and fiery temptations, we do not try to steady ourselves or others by dwelling on the undoubted antiquity of our Church and the regularity of our ministry. The true power of our religion resides in bringing man and God close together, and filling our hearts with love for God, as manifest in Jesus Christ. Love and Faith, self-dedication to God in the service of man, these are the great springs of Christian life and service.

Because of the sacramental value and mysterious spiritual power that these leaders of the Commission on Faith and Order assign to unity of organization, the whole movement, as interpreted by them, is essentially opposed to the freedom and spirituality of the Gospel. By all means let us do away with unnecessary divisions in Christendom; but at the same time let us be careful to

preserve helpful divisions. People who love a liturgy and people who dislike a liturgy cannot harmoniously worship together. Men who love the ethics of freedom cannot work congenially with men who adore the obsequiousness fostered by despotisms. Two religions ought not to be included in one Church. It was a sane conviction in the early Church that the Christian Easter should stand separate from the Jewish Passover. Judaism and Christianity could not coexist in one society. Neither can Protestantism and Romanism work together in one church. There are separations that make for peace, as truly as the separation which takes place when a son takes his bride out of her mother's house and establishes his own home apart from his parents and her parents. This whole idea that the weight of Christian testimony depends upon the vastness of the organization that we can build up, ignores the powers that enabled a despised Jewish sect to conquer the Roman world. We don't wish to ground the faith of our people on the size or the history of our Church. Our aim should be to teach people to put their trust in the living God, speaking to them in the depths of their souls, as they are thrilled by the good news of his love, made manifest in Jesus Christ. Truth was made progressive in its revelation that we might constantly be sifted and tried by the obligation to choose between following the multitude, and obeying the inner voice. The dreadful lack of Christian principles and Christian tone in our social, industrial and political life is largely due to an undue emphasis by our religious teachers upon the institutional and doctrinal side of Christianity and to a neglect of the affections, dispositions, temper and spirit of our Master. This ambitious Commission on Faith and Order seems to me simply to perpetuate this error. I feel certain that the men of liberal theology and progressive tendencies in all the Churches are very much of the same mind in regard to the whole matter. Let us unite in

faith, in love and in service, and leave behind these outworn conceptions of salvation by perfected machinery, and of the uplift of the world by a great religious Trust. As for lessening our own freedom of utterance or asking concessions from men whose work God has owned, for the sake of quieting medieval scruples, such a policy ought not to be accepted for a moment.